

Complete Control
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I've come to realize in life that one rarely if ever grasps the magnitude of a life altering moment during the present tense. It takes weeks, months and often time years of reflection and progression to be able to truly understand and comprehend the far reaching implications of the said moment. Thus, I've spent countless hours and scores of conversations searching for a way to come to grips with the triumphs and struggles of the Monroe Park Tent City of August, 1998 and how to the best of my ability to preserve these memories and stories for generations to come. What you are now holding is a living, breathing testament as shared by those who came together against all odds to create a moment in time, a place forever frozen in our hearts, a moment where the people realized en masse that we are not puppets, that we have a voice, a face, an uncontrollable urge to take our lives back, for the weekend, for good!!! This is the people's dream, the people's story. Enjoy. Love & Solidarity,

greg



Complete Control back issues: Issue #3 – A year in the life of issue with arrest stories, travels to the Northwest, California and Chiapas, quitting my job, squatting failures, falling in love and an interview with ex George Jackson Brigade member Ed Mead to top it all off. Available through DMM, S. Chicago ABC zine distro & Tree of Knowledge. Issue #4 – Job history, a critical mass story, writings on gentrification and beautification in Richmond, persecution of prostitutes and anarchist writings of old.

Available through DMM. Issue #5 – More job accounts, Fear of a Black Richmond piece, Life and Death of a collective, thoughts on anarchist organizing in my community and an interview with Catholic Worker Bill Frankel-Streit. Available through DMM, S. Chicago ABC zine distro & Tree of Knowledge. Issue #6 – The Northwest issue. My Seattle/WTQ account, a reprint from Livin in Doom Town on Portland gentrification and a reprint from Revolt! on Anarchy in Eugene. Also included is a peoples history of Vancouver's Gastown district. Available through DMM, Tree of Knowledge, AK Press, Words As Weapons and S. Chicago ABC zine distro. Addresses are as follows: *DMM – PO Box 17838 Clearwater, FL 33762. *Tree of Knowledge Press – PO Box 251766 Little Rock, AR 72225 South Chicago ABC Zine distro – PO Box 721 Homewood, IL 60430 *AK Press – PO Box 40682 San Francisco, CA 94140 *Words As Weapons – PO Box 24131 University City, MO 63130 Issues 3-5 available for \$1 and Issue 6 for \$1.50 to the appropriate addresses. Send extra for current catalogs. All other mail to Complete Control: PO Box 5021 Richmond, VA 23220

The Park is Ours

Anarchism is today and always has been a movement by the people for the people. It is a movement rooted in resistance. A movement of common folk, farmers, factory workers, immigrants, students, peasants and millions of Earth's inhabitants who long for a world where no one goes without. A world free from domination, slavery, militarism, oppression and all forms of the state and it's various tentacles.



In my relatively short time in the struggle, I have traveled far and wide, attended lectures, discussions and workshops. I have organized in my neighborhood, in my city and in cities across the country in times of distress. I have read and studied the glorious and forgotten timeline of the people's movement. I have researched, written and compiled stories in newsletters, pamphlets and zines in order to share what I have learned and to better educate myself. Until August 28, 1998 I was still very much in doubt if Anarchism could truly work amongst a large, diverse group of people over an extended period of time.

The General Strike Collective was a radical grassroots community based Anarchist group that had been functioning here in Richmond, Virginia since around May of 1996. The organization was primarily made up of young folks in their early twenties of whom most had moved to the Richmond area with the intent of creating a group of the makeup of General Strike. I, myself, also moved to Richmond in '96 and hooked up with the folks from General Strike later on that year.

Protesters highlight plight of homeless

▼ PARK FROM PAGE B1

up, and dozens of candles flickered as the protesters chatted to the accompaniment of bongos and a three-stringed strumstick played by 29-year-old Lisa Fennel, a member of Richmond Animal Rights Network.

"People shouldn't be pushed aside and looked over because they don't have a home," Fennel said.

But she was planning to leave the moment the police appeared. "I've got eight cats and four dogs. I can't get arrested."

Only a handful of homeless men joined the protest, and they stuck to the benches at the edges of the park, unsure about getting arrested.

"It being the weekend, you'll have to stay [in the lockup] till Monday," said Harold Crisp, 42, from the bench he picked out for the evening.

And he's also not sure what the protest will accomplish. "I don't know," Crisp said. "Anything's better than nothing. At least they're trying." He said he's been homeless for four months. "I'll tell you, it's nobody's fault but my own — being around substance abuse, uh-huh."

But, as sundown, the protesters were clear they had already made a difference.

"There's a lot more awareness, a



BRUCE PARKER/TIMES-DISPATCH

PROTEST CAMP. Darkness fell, but police stayed away as VCU students and homeless advocates set up camp in Monroe Park last night.

lot of freshman coming out here" to see what's going on, Arey said.

"We're coming at it from a radical perspective," said Greg Wells with General Strike, who helped organize the protest. "We're trying to pull as many people here as we can."

Wells said city ordinances "make being homeless in Richmond a walking violation of the law."

Sababu Sanyika, a 48-year-old handyman living in the Carver neighborhood a few blocks north of the park, said gentrification is making it so that lower-income people can't afford to stay in the city.

He's worried about cloning, in vitro fertilization and an evil Big

Brother ready to exterminate the impoverished. "Maybe they'll shoot us with some kind of VD, like AIDS, hmmm?" Sanyika said, eyebrows arching.

It was an eclectic crowd, made up of more than a few vegetarians who worried that jail food wouldn't be suitable. One young man with "LSD" tattooed in large, ragged letters on his forehead claimed to have been named by psycho-killer Charles Manson.

"I fully believe in freedom of expression," he said when asked about his tattoo. He requested that his name, which contained four Zs, not be published because the govern-

ment is watching him.

The problem is this nation's "exploitive: economy," said Frankel-Streit, who has taken a vow of poverty. The country's homeless hardly have a chance, he said. "The whole system works against them."

By midnight, the police still hadn't appeared, and some of the protesters drifted off to sleep.

The mood was 1960ish, and several present voiced pride in having something they believed in so strongly that they would risk arrest.

Besides, Becky Arey said, they weren't hurting anyone. "There are a lot of things I could do worse than civil disobedience."

Of the early days workload, a large majority of our time was spent organizing and building links with the homeless community of Richmond by standing in solidarity with those who rarely ever have anyone to stand with. Through working with Richmond Food Not Bombs, and a local homeless group A Society Without A Name (ASWAN), members of the collective began to learn and dissect the far-reaching implications that the corrupt city government in alliance with the upper crust business and academic communities had for the long-range plan of the homeless population in our city.

Over the course of several months in the early period of 1998, we began to seriously discuss and debate a plan of action against the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), for their ongoing role in attempting to eradicate the homeless in our city. As we started to engage folks in conversation we learned of horrid instances where the VCU police department had physically and verbally threatened and intimidated homeless individuals in and around Monroe Park, of which the university, in conjunction with the city, had jurisdiction. After working closely with ASWAN and Food Not Bombs, amongst scores of other civil-rights groups, to overturn some city proposed anti-poor zoning ordinances the prior year, we felt the momentum was ours to run with, we did just that.

It was in the late spring of '98 that the collective decided unanimously to

propagandize and organize a 4 day takeover of Monroe Park in the form of a tent city aimed at exposing VCU's ongoing meddling in the homeless community and rapidly increasing gentrification of the Carver Community just North of the main artery of the campus. As Anarchists it's our duty to go and be wherever the struggle needs us to be. Summer seemed to fly by amidst scores of planning sessions, flyering campaigns, street work and alliance building. By the time late August rolled around we found ourselves high spirited but still very much uncertain as to how in the world this dream of ours was ever gonna work out.

Protesters take over city park

Camp-in highlights plight of homeless

BY MARK HOLMBERG

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

The Monroe Park protesters were prepped and ready to be arrested last night in their fight for the homeless vs. the establishment.

If the police start handcuffing, "know what you're doing is right," Bill Frankel-Streit with Catholic Worker told the group gathered cross-legged around him. "Keep re-

membering that: It's just. And have fun. You have the moral high ground."

About 50 people, many of them college students, stuck it out in Monroe Park last night as part of a planned three-day, camp-in protest to challenge Virginia Commonwealth University's sprawling presence and the city ordinance closing the park at sunset.

"People have to sleep somewhere," said 19-year-old Becky Arey, a sophomore psychology major at VCU and the only female pro-

tester who signed up to be arrested.

She told her parents about the protest. "They said make sure you're out of jail in time for class Monday morning," said Arey, a member of General Strike, a group dedicated to "fanning the flames of discontent in Richmond," according to its newsletter.

The park was festooned by banners proclaiming "The Park Is Ours" and "Stop Racist and Classist Expansion." A half-a-dozen tents were set

PLEASE SEE **PARK** PAGE B3 ▶



General Strike Bonds with People who are Homeless

General Strike, a local grassroots radical collective committed to confronting injustice and inequality, organized Tent City from Aug. 28 - Aug. 31 in Monroe Park, a city park that holds a reputation for hating people who are homeless and restricts usage after sunset. Tent City created a broad coalition of personnel and students of VCU, community members, and some people who are homeless to expose, confront, and change VCU's anti-poor policies. It is hoped that VCU will become more positive and proactive on issues of poverty in Richmond. This account was written by Greg Wells who helped to organize and experienced the event.

The rationale and reasoning behind organizing an event of this scale are complex and far reaching. It is the old theory that if you watch your community get picked apart and do nothing about it then bad guys will come after you one day and there will be no one left to fight for you. All feel the effects of the full scale war that VCU is waging on the poor and homeless of our city. So, from our initial discussion about Tent City in the Spring of this year until the 12 noon kickoff on Friday, August 28th, our collective made a reality out of the impossible dream by organizing a mass event, called Tent City, with a willpower that would never die.

Going into the Tent City weekend, we had no idea what would happen or what to expect. We were prepared for every scenario imaginable. In the weeks preceding the weekend so many

rumors and different angles presented themselves that we found ourselves, at times, focusing so much on potential negative outcomes.

We were positively caught off guard on Friday night. Things began humbly as we established our presence in Monroe Park and aligned with our friends and allies. We felt prepared for the adventure that lay ahead. From the beginning spontaneity played a crucial role in the development of the weekend.

Park curfew came and went. The group felt a sense of relief because there was no police intervention for us who stayed in the park after sunset. Once word circulated about the lack of intervention, the numbers in the camp swelled by leaps and bounds.

Men, women, children, homeless, activists, students, and supporters of all races and backgrounds coexisted

in beautiful harmony. A drum and guitar circle that broke out amongst numerous new enchanted students helped to develop the sense of kinship amongst all in attendance.

The encampment turned into a self sufficient commune with free meals, medical aid, and a mountain of free clothes. People, who would have otherwise never thought twice about each other, were smiling, laughing, and sharing their worldly possessions for the common interest of all. The park was completely respected since we constantly cleaned and looked after it as well.

Saturday night over one hundred folks slept in all corners of the park. The park was safer that night than probably in decades. Folks came together and quickly resolved the quarrel caused by a few rowdies who tried to disrupt the spirit of the weekend. Everyone strongly agreed that a few folks were not going to spoil the importance and significance of the weekend.

As the weekend drew to a close, we realized that we had stood our ground despite the park's curfew and VCU's oppressiveness. We discovered that we had done something far greater in the process as well. We created a family. The positive energy flowed and engulfed all of us. The powerful and strong energy and spirit of Monroe Park Tent City will live on in us for a long time to come. With love, the General Strike Collective and Monroe Park Tent City Family '98.

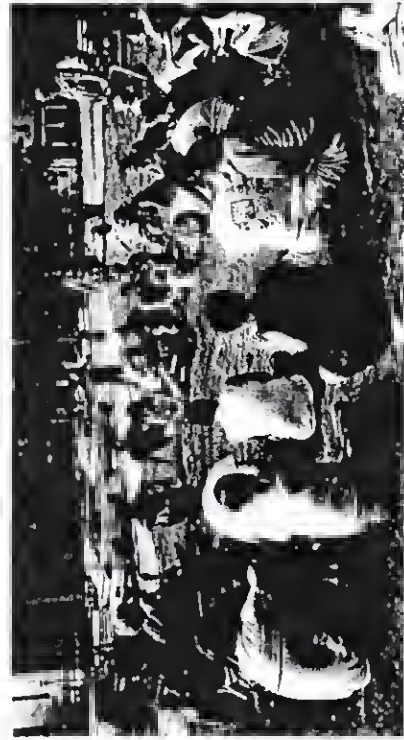
General Strike Collective meets every Wednesday at 8 p.m.. For more information, call 355-6914.

Monroe Park was picked for a very simple and yet very powerful reason. It sits right in the middle of the heart of VCU and serves as a safe place, a sanctuary for the downtrodden to slip away from the grinding hustle of the city, the stifling summer heat, a place to get to a few hours sleep, have a bite to eat or just to catch up with a friend for a lively conversation. Ever since the park was the first fairgrounds in Richmond in the 1850's it has been a place of tranquility, of merriment, a beautiful green space in the heart of the ever growing development of a major urban enclave. During the 1970's, 80's and early 90's the park was open for the increasing homeless population to camp out there over night. After a series of nuggings in the early 90's the city council passed a restriction on public camping in all city parks. After that the mere act of being homeless was in essence a perpetual violation of the law. With this as our motivation we sat out at 12 noon on the 28th of August to create an urban, Anarchist commune in the heart of our city.

August the 28th also was very strategically decided upon as a launch date for the event. The period immediately prior to the fall enrollment at the university is widely known throughout homeless ranks as sweep season. It is the time of year when the city, the university and wealthy civic groups crack down hard and continuously upon the downtrodden. Violations and arrests are made for panhandling, sleeping in public, large groups congregating or even merely looking suspicious. This entire process is carried out year after year in an attempt of "cleansing the campus area of undesirables" so the affluent parents of Northern Virginia VCU enrollees will feel safe and secure in dropping off little junior in a big, scary city for the first time. That weekend parents and freshmeo being dropped off at their dorms were forced to take a long hard look at the policies of VCU and the impact those policies are reeking upon our city.

As we arrived at the park and began to set up our encampment, numbers gradually grew over the course of the day. At first it was primarily the General Strike ranks along with other sectors of the radical scene. Towards the end of the work day the numbers increased significantly as nightfall approached. As homeless folks began to arrive in droves, many set back cautiously and studied what was transpiring. It was as if they were all waiting for some instructions on how to participate, how to communicate. Having been a veteran of the daily feeding programs I could sense the hesitancy on their parts to jump into all the work that we had to get ready for the evening.

Around about 4 o'clock dinner was served and our vision was starting to take shape. Literature was being widely distributed. Folks were engaging in conversation all over the park. Food, clothes and sleeping gear were being distributed for free and the general mood of the park was one of solidarity and strength in numbers. The first real barrier to be broken was dealing with the droves of media that began swarming the park. They would arrive and inevitably ask to speak to the leader. We dispelled any myths of leadership by having an open invitation for any and all to share their thoughts with the media over the course of the weekend. In some cases, this was used as an attempt to discredit our cohesiveness, but ultimately it empowered a lot of folks in the park to take on a more vocal, proactive role over the next few days, as opposed to passive participation. We were becoming a family.



Justin Wilson

VCU has ability to help homeless

The Richmond-Times Dispatch, in its infinite compassion and empathy wrote on the editorial page "If some of this street people who took part in the three-day Monroe Park protest on behalf of homeless people had spent that time looking for a job, they might not be homeless anymore."

The Times-Dispatch was of course referring to the protest led by some progressive Richmond groups against VCU policies toward the homeless.

They complained that the university is taking over the city and not providing enough for those who are disadvantaged. These protesters marched to the President's house and demanded a meeting with VCU President Eugene P. Trani. They were denied such a meeting, but did talk with some high-level VCU officials.

Through their 60s-style passive resistance, however, the group has yet again brought the plight of the homeless in rela-

its nature as a community institution, should contribute to the existing efforts aimed at alleviating economic hardship. In fact, as a leading "research university," VCU could even become a leader in developing new, more productive efforts.

I see no reason why the university could not develop a socio-economic based affirmative action program for university jobs. This would encourage those qualified individuals who have met hardship in their lives too apply for jobs at VCU, giving them a way out from the poverty the often sends them to the streets.

Even more radical was the idea proposed on this page last academic year. Why not open the student commons during off-hours for use by the homeless. I see the university setting this up as a conditional privilege. As long as the commons facilities are in the exact same condition they were in the morning, the program would con-

tion to VCU to the forefront. To properly handle this issue we must examine where we stand. I cannot think of any state university in the Commonwealth that does anything sizable to assist the homeless. It is just not a duty that has ever fallen into the bureaucratic domain of Virginia's higher education system.

In addition, homeless did not tend to walk the streets of Harrisonburg, Blacksburg or Charlottesville like they do Richmond. Perhaps, however, VCU possesses a special responsibility being the only "real" urban university in the state. It can be considered that as an urban resident we have an implied task to aid the homeless.

I have never been thought of as a person who is overly sympathetic to the difficulties of what the British call "rough sleeping," but I have to say I disagree that VCU has any required responsibility to support the neighboring homeless. I think VCU, by

time.

If something in the middle of the night, the privilege would be revoked. This would not cost VCU anything but could result in priceless public relation goodwill. With such a policy, I doubt it would be abused.

Just like last year, however, this idea will be ridiculed by those whose creativity is perhaps stunted by their insensitivity.

These are, of course, just suggestions. Someone who hardly considers himself an expert in the management of the problem of homelessness delivers these as proposals. Imagine what some of the students in Urban Planning and Public Policy could do with a little time and a little research.

I'm not suggesting that VCU jump through hoops to assist the homeless, but maybe a little ingenuity could be recommended and might make things easier for both those who are privileged and those who are homeless.



As nightfall crept upon us that first night, tension began to mount as to what role the cops were gonna take regarding the sundown park curfew. Everyone in attendance was briefed and alerted to the potential risk for the violation. Yet nearly no one left. As cops in cruisers began swarming the park in rapid succession, we held our ground and created a sort of open air party for all to take part in. Word has it the mayor sent orders from downtown to leave us be as he realized the public-relations nightmare that cops coming in and rolling heads would have upon him and the council. Needless to say we had already

The incredible and spontaneous nature of our encampment really began to take hold that first night as roaming and rotating bands of participants scoured the park on routine rounds to ensure that everyone was safe. Although the largest body of our camp was in one fairly tight corner of the park, our mere presence inspired late night arrivals to sleep safely in all corners of the park. As morning broke word began to spread around the city about what was taking place down at Monroe Park. That a wild mix of Anarchists and homeless and their allies had taken the park over and were running it on their terms. There began to be live news broadcasts, the paper ran a feature article and random sympathizers were constantly arriving with food, blankets, clothes and warm wishes. Our morale was deepening rapidly.

Another powerful occurrence was when homeless participants began distributing flyers and sweeping the city demanding that their friends come and stand with us in our quest. The most straight forward attempt at this was when the early Saturday morning meal program came to serve in the park. One guy in particular who had slept in the park on Friday night began tormenting those standing in line to receive food that morning.

"Where the hell were all of you last night? We're all out here for you. You will come and eat the food, and complain about how miserable you are, but when it comes to laying your butts on the line you just sit there. If I don't see each and every one of you all out here tonight, the word is gonna be out on you phonies." I sat back with a slight grin on my face. Within hours our numbers had doubled.

Why Should you care?

Why should we, as students, care what VCU does outside of the classroom? The question is simple; the answers are many. First, our money pays the bills and funds many of its projects. Do you really want your money paying VCU police to harass homeless folks for doing nothing more than hanging out in a public park. Something many students do everyday but don't get harassed for? Do you really want your money being used to buy up property in surrounding neighborhoods, thus, forcing people out of their homes and destroying the social fabric of the city? Right now, our money is being used for these exact purposes.

Second, VCU is a public institution lying in the heart of Richmond. It has a responsibility to Richmond's citizens and the surrounding communities. Instead of invading Oregon Hill, Jackson Ward and Carver, VCU should embrace these neighborhoods and work with them to better the city, uniting under the banner of education and progress for all of Richmond.

Finally, VCU should be held accountable for its actions. Who is behind the establishment of these policies and whom do they answer to? The people at the top are President Trani, the Board of Visitors and the Governor. They should be answering to us! Ultimately we, the taxpayers and students, should have a greater say in the policies of the university.

Though we are focusing on VCU's Treatment of homeless and working-class folks this lack of a coherent student voice in policy decisions leads to more questions: Why are students paying for printing privileges twice, at enrollment time and in the computer lab? Why are food choices on campus limited to McDonalds even though a judge in England has found similarities between its marketing to kids and child abuse? Why isn't African-American studies a major? Why is VCU practically ignoring its art program while bowing down to Motorola? If students had a greater say in policy decisions, would any of this be taking place?

We want to stress that we are not against VCU as an institution. But we are against certain policies that go against the idea of education, progress and equality. VCU is an important part of the city and a great educational opportunity. Unfortunately, everybody doesn't get to enjoy these fruits. Many people in the surrounding communities are ignored, harassed and even trampled upon by the university.

We, as students who are lucky enough to have the resources to attend VCU, must stand up and demand accountability from those making the decisions. Only when students join together in solidarity will we have the power to change VCU's policies. This Tent City marks the beginning of such a time.

Saturday was full of productivity amidst play. A medical caravan showed up and set up shop in the middle of the park to give free health check-ups to all. Freshmen enrollees and curious onlookers passed through and were educated on the issues. New friendships were secured, old ones were rejuvenated and camaraderie was being extended amongst all. At large volunteers helped in the meal preparation, men, women and children of all ages played games and carried on as if on a family vacation and that evenings park assembly was an introductory course in Anarchist organizing 101.

Amongst the forty to fifty folks that participated, nearly all were new to consensus decision making and non-hierarchical structures of accomplishing goals. So, for close to two hours we debated, shared, planned and mapped out a very cohesive battle plan and set of demands for the university and all on hand were heard, their views respected and their hearts filled with boundless enthusiasm. If there ever were any illusions of anyone being in charge, they were put to rest for good after the success of the park assembly.

As the day melted away and nightfall was upon us again we were tested on several occasions small and great. As there were now between the neighborhood of 150-200 people taking part in the action and preparing to camp out, a few drunks came to be in our presence and created a world of trouble. Firstly, someone had broken into a backyard in a neighboring community and stolen a tent and brought it to the park to utilize. Then a number of the aforementioned drunks became rowdy and attempted to fight one another. Another guy was threatened to be killed in a very serious manner the moment he left the park. It looked as if all was about to crumble or even worse that we might have to rely on the pigs to come in and settle disputes when something miraculous occurred.

All of the commotion had disturbed the large majority of those in the park to resolve the problems effectively and quickly. People darted to the various hotspots out of their own free will and explained to those carrying on what we were trying to create, how they were jeopardizing all with their behavior and asked them to please be considerate and to disperse if they couldn't calm down as they would surely have the police on hand. Almost simultaneously those who were being destructive left the park for good. Collectively we had diffused a dangerous situation and protected all we had worked to create. We were stronger then ever before.

Sunday brought the final full day of the takeover and newer faces still. The day was full of dialogue, more games, continued outreach and another park assembly. In this session we made our plans for the following days march to President Trani's office and how we would deliver our set of demands. We also talked about tent city being merely a launching pad for a long term, highly concentrated effort at attacking the university for their harmful gentrification of the Carver community, their alliance with the city in criminalizing the homeless and their general lack of inclusion of their neighbors in their wholly undemocratic decision making process.

All in all, Sunday was primarily a day of leisure. A day of reflection at what we had accomplished. The park was safer that weekend then it had been in years. All resources were shared communally, all tasks were evenly distributed and carried out by all on hand. We had practiced conflict resolution in a highly charged atmosphere. We stood in direct opposition to a powerful and threatening entity in our lives, challenged the city's fascist park curfew laws and created a sense of unity and direction that would fuel our fires for years to come.



On Monday morning we cleaned the park thoroughly, collected all of our gear and rallied through campus on opening day being boisterous and defiant all the way to the door of the president's office. The media followed the whole way rolling live footage. We delivered our demands and insisted upon a meeting that morning. After being shuffled around to the VCU police department building a couple of blocks away, three representatives were invited inside to have dialogue with the director of community affairs for a very brief, VCU dominated meeting. Then suddenly for the first time in days we had nowhere left to go. Not wanting the momentum to die I invited a few folks over for a celebratory feast at my place. After a while everyone was gone and I was alone for the first time since Thursday.

I sat back and cried as I reminisced about the powerful world that we had just created for ourselves. I didn't want to go back to my day job, paying rent, living in a house with folks who I wasn't sure if I even respected. That first taste of liberation nearly made me choke. From that day forward I knew and realized that Anarchism was as valid today as it was in Chicago in 1886, or Barcelona in 1936, or Paris in 1968. That it is not a dying, stale old doctrine of the 18th century, that it is the lifeblood of those who stand up to reclaim their lives everyday, all over the world. It is a struggle, a movement that grows stronger with each passing day until we reach a critical mass of resistance and take back that which is rightfully ours to begin with, our world. In the spirit of August 28th, greg.

That weekend was one of the most exciting times of my life. We organized the weekend-long protest but it grew into a life of its own. So many people were energized into taking an active role in the tent city that it blew my mind. Community meetings and group decision-making, people determined to get arrested if necessary, over 100 homeless folks sleeping safely within the park (when usually they would be booted out) were all so amazing.

We had formed an incredible community in the park, even if it was just for one weekend. Activists, students, homeless folks, community people all lived together peacefully at the tent city. We ate in the park together, slept in the park together, played together, struggled together and looked out for one another. When any issues came up (like a couple of drunks causing trouble) at least 5-10 people would quickly help to resolve the problem. Although the police kept a constant presence and attempted to intimidate the protestors, the mood in the park was one of joy and peace.

The tent city had accomplished more then any of us had ever thought possible: all the major news organizations covered it, the university administration was shifting their pants, the mayor and city council had their hands tied for fear of looking bad on the news, and anarchy was created in Monroe Park. Even if it was just for the weekend I had lived free within an Anarchist community. Although this sounds a bit melodramatic, I think most of those involved would agree. It was such an amazing event.

Two events stick out in my mind the most. The first event was when a homeless man fell into a seizure and I ran to the nearby dorm to call an ambulance. I was scared shitless. We had never even thought about something like that happening. But fortunately, he ended up being alright. The second event, on a much lighter note, was the wiffleball game! How many protests have wiffleball games? It was a serious but fun time. In so many ways it was a community.

But not all went well. Our biggest problem, which all of us agree, was the follow up. We completely dropped the ball once the weekend was over. We had so much momentum that went to shit. All the local news, the city council, the university and the mayor had General Strike and tent city on their lips. To the powers that be it was a nightmare. But because many of us had no idea what to do once that weekend protest was over for them, they breathed a sigh of relief, and continued doing what they were doing — treating the poor and homeless in Richmond like shit.

There's no excuse and there is no one to blame for the lack of follow-up. We all bear some weight. Many of us just didn't have the skills to do what was needed after the action. But we sure do know how to fucking protest! Anyway, it was an amazing success overall. We accomplished our short term goals, made Monroe Park the safest it's been in decades, provided a safe haven for the homeless of Richmond for the weekend, built a wonderful community, played some kick-ass wiffleball and learned many valuable lessons. Number one being that you can fit five people in a two-person tent. Peace.

(Continued from page 3)

General Strike Responds

Personal transportation these locations are almost totally inaccessible. Public transportation to these areas is sparse. Yes, it is also true that Hannabard's and Winn-Dixie are including natural foods sections in their stores, but they do not have a selection that comes close to what ET's offers and there are some key items that you just can't find there (a kudos to you). So, while ET's doesn't have exclusive reign over the natural foods market, for a large group of people, it is their only real option in the Richmond area and the Food Co-op closed down and took the opportunity to raise their prices. The term "monopoly" was a simplification and too harsh of a label.

We do not feel that it is bad for a business to be successful. We feel that certain business practices that have been enforced in the process of expansion are negative and harmful to the community and the employees. We would like to see ET's be successful, but not at the expense of just business practices, and not by alienating the people who gave it life.

As we indicated, our survey included past and present employees with varying amounts of time spent with ET's and no, these folks are not close personal friends. The stories we printed were corroborated by a number of the respondents, so we feel that it was legitimate to print them. If any third party sources were avoided it was for the safety of the employees. We welcome you to respond and will send you a questionnaire. Fortunately though, some of the situations concerned in the questionnaire have since been somewhat resolved. As you mentioned, ET's has unveiled a comprehensive benefits package and this deserves a commendation. Also, people associated with the questionable hiring and firing practices are no longer with ET's. We are not out to tear the ET's management down or cause a conspiracy, we were simply responding to early warning signs that could indicate an unhealthy pre-occupation with profit at the expense of community and employee welfare.

We are keeping track of you

-Anonymous

General Strike responds:

Yes, we actually received a plain white envelope with a plain, white piece of paper with this on it. To this we respond: Good!

(Continued from page 1)

Tent City a Resounding Success

formed solutions to any problems that arose and together rejoiced at our small victories.

Through the Tent City, barriers were broken and people who do not normally interact, such as college students and homeless people, had a chance to sit down together and talk openly and honestly. We had assemblies to discuss the various reasons we were in the park, and together created the demands later given to VCU. Everyone including VCU officials who refused to sit down and talk, were invited to attend and take an active role at these meetings, showing how real, direct democracy can function and meet our needs. By the end of the weekend we truly felt that the

park was our home, and behaved as if it was by keeping it clean, keeping liquor and violence out of it and showing respect for all others there.

Monroe Park officially closes at dark and a number of people were willing to get arrested if police came and told us to leave the park. Friday night was tense, yet empowering, waiting and wondering if the police were going to show up. Fortunately, they never did, and the entire weekend went without arrests. We have heard rumors that Mayor Cain asked city police to let us be as long as we were peaceful. Monday night a number of people decided to continue the encampment and, unfortunately, the police did tell them to leave. Two people committed civil disobedience and received summons. At their hearing, one of the activists did receive a jail sentence of 10 days, the other was required to do community service (which they were already doing, but...).

The Monroe Park tent city concluded Monday morning with a march through campus ending at President Trani's house where two security officers were waiting for us. Mark E. Smith, the director of VCU's Governmental and Community Relations department agreed to speak with three of us. As a group, we decided that a representative of ASWAN, a representative of the Carver community and a member of General Strike Collective would be the three to sit down and discuss our demands with Smith and Dan Dean Jr., the chief of campus police. Our three spokespersons were given a total of only 15 minutes to speak with the VCU officials, much time of which Smith used to lecture on the use of "proper channels" and not seeming to really listen to our arguments. Despite this, it was a positive step that created an open dialogue.

Since tent city, a group of people who attended the event have continued to meet at Food Not Bombs meals on Sunday in the park and discuss further actions and plans. At the moment, a panel discussion between those influential at the tent city (ASWAN, members of the Carver Community and General Strike), homeless folks, Mark Smith and Dan Dean Jr. is in the works, with the tentative date being October 12 at 7pm. More information on this is to come, so keep your eyes and ears open.

New Groups in Richmond

Sierra Student Coalition of Richmond, the student arm of the Sierra Club, started a new chapter at VCU. It will be focusing on animal agriculture, urban sprawl, corporate pollution and recycling, as well as other issues. Anyone interested, contact Marc at 353-5055 or e-mail at mredmond@vcu.org.

The Helping Hand Society/Richmond Area Housing Rehabilitation Project is a non-profit organization providing the homeless community in Richmond opportunities and resources to assist them in establishing acceptable community status. Some goals include: providing educational and employment opportunities, establishing emergency shelters and moving people into permanent housing. Contact Bob at 783-0678 or helpinghandsociety@yahoo.com for more info.

Anti-Racist Action reemerges in Richmond! ARA is a loose national network of over 100 chapters working to combat racism and fascism in our society. They battle against police brutality, organized hate groups, racism in our schools and colleges, the criminal (in)justice system and other manifestations of bigotry. Write to ARA Richmond, PO Box 5688, Richmond, VA 23220.

Monroe Park Tent City. The whole idea had seemed so foolishly ambitious to me. I thought that it was a beautiful poetic gesture, but it seemed groundless — not because our motives were unjustified, but because I didn't see what mission it would fulfill. I felt like our demands were so nebulous that we might just as well have been standing on a mountaintop and yelling "Can't everyone be nicer?" ... but I was still getting my feet wet theo.

I had started working with General Strike in early spring of that year. It was the beginning of my dedication to activism and social awareness. During my life I had always felt that things weren't quite right, but I had not done nor felt I could do anything about it. My position of privilege blinded me to obvious hierarchies and oppressions, but my parents' immigrant status kept me just far enough outside of the beautiful people to leave me with an uneasiness with the status quo. The knowledge base indicated that the slight nausea I felt was a condition of being young and not mature enough to accept the "inevitabilities" of reality, but I still felt sick. Without a name a virus still causes a violent immune reaction.



Jumping into a project like tent city was intimidating. My life growing up deeply immersed in the personally disempowering structure of capitalism left me with an innate insecurity about my ability to enact change or speak truth. In the case of tent city, I had not personally been the target of the oppression we were pointing out, so I found myself thinking sometimes that maybe we were portraying the situation in a reactionary, exaggerated manner. Consumer society is a very effective tool at making dissenters doubt their "extremist" statements. But since then, I've learned a little more, I've seen a little more and all this with fewer preconceptions about what I observe.

My friend Petra had mentioned the tent city to me before I'd come to any General Strike meeting. I think I reacted with a kind of dumbfounded numbness at the realization that a small group of people, very much like myself, had the courage/ability to do something so audacious and ambitious. I doubted whether it would actually happen, whether something so bold and loud could manage to rise through the choking clouds of sweet-smelling magnolia and "southern hospitality" to make an unapologetic statement.

It was several months after this that General Strike unquestionably committed ourselves to making this (s)weed grow. The project dominated our meetings and organizational efforts. We discussed: who our potential supporters were, what our issues with VCU were, how we wanted to structure the protest, how long it would be, if we would attempt to get permits for our action, how to deal with arrests if they occurred. What did everyone in attendance need to know to make this safe and effective? How could we ensure a sensitivity to the special needs which arose for protesters who were homeless? What was our structure? How could we foster a non-hierarchical community? What were our goals? Obviously, we had a lot of loaded questions.

It was an exercise in acute awareness. We already knew that what we were doing was worthwhile, but we were only a catalyst, moving to action a sentiment which was already present in the community. We could and would be educated by that community and had to organize ourselves in a way which would make that invitation to participate obvious to those who were not part of General Strike and allow us respond to lessons learned. We were hoping that the sense of liberation created by our temporary autonomous zone would inspire words borne of confidence and acceptance from the mouths of people who all too often were forced to hide and shut up. We frantically gathered tents, sleeping bags, poles, tarps, blankets, and railroad ties. We talked to other groups in the city asking for support in any way. We organized to have food served. We discussed what to do about toilets.

Winds were blowing. A local free magazine gave the event a sizable announcement write-up and was very supportive. We blitzed the city with fliers. General Strike members in high schools spread the word through their schools. We were invited to come on a cable access show to talk about and announce it. The city knew it was coming, but we were still nervous about how much support we would actually get come August 28.

We tried to contact VCU about their policies—they avoided us...repeatedly. We could not get anyone to call us back. The entire office knew us and what our intentions were. We became a total nuisance to them, for trying to give them a chance to come out and partake in the discussion honestly, with the people whom their policies were affecting. They wanted no part of it...which betrayed either guilt or indifference, both of which were reprehensible. They didn't want to waste their time discussing policy with rabble and uninformed reactionary kids. We were probably all crazy anyway. Since we were championing a hunch of drug addicts, criminals and crazies...right? Their reaction deepened our conviction that we needed to spotlight the university's attitude towards the community, or rather how elitist their definition of community was. To add to their arrogance, after all was over, they testified to the press that we had made no attempts to contact them on these issues, we were just knee-jerking. Bold-faced liars—and they could get away with it because their detractors were outside of the comfortable, familiar territory of liberal middle-class activists.

GENERAL STRIKE

FANNING THE FLAMES OF DISCONTENT IN RICHMOND

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 1998

THE PARK IS OURS!

From August 28-31, General Strike, ASWAN, students, homeless folks, activists and concerned citizens took over Monroe Park. The occupation took the form of a tent city, which is a non-violent, direct action approach to exposing injustice in this society. This tent city was directed at VCU and its anti-poor policies, including police harassment of the homeless population, VCU's encroachment into the Carver and Jackson Ward communities and the lack of a community or student voice in the decision making process of VCU.

This particular weekend was chosen for the Tent City so that it would coincide with the arrival of incoming freshman and returning students. During this time, VCU police step up the harassment of the homeless in and around campus, especially in Monroe Park. Many in the homeless community refer to this time



PROTESTERS TAKE THE PEOPLE'S MESSAGE TO VCU

as sweep season because some are arrested and many others are forced out of the area. This "out of sight, out of mind" policy is enforced so that the new students and their families are kept blind to the dire situation of many people here in Richmond.

Another issue that the tent city protest addressed is the expansion of VCU into the surrounding neighborhoods and the effects it has on these communities. The building of the Siegel Center, a new parking deck and a Fine Arts building on Broad Street and the influx of students into the Carver and Jackson Ward areas are two recent events in the continuing gentrification process that have impacted these neighborhoods. With the help of money-hungry landlords, VCU is tearing away at the social fabric of these communities. As the landlords raise the rents, lower income people are slowly being squeezed out of these locales so that students, who are able to pay higher rent, can move in.

The weekend long protest was a complete success; the park was turned into an autonomous zone with a true sense of community. It really was a community considering the number of people who spent the entire weekend or large portions of it in the park. Saturday night there were over 100 people sleeping in the park and at every meal, dozens of people sat down together and ate. We shared our food, our blankets, our hopes and tears, and our lives. We collectively



Members of General Strike and the general public present their demands to VCU

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Specifically with that weekend, the way a lot of folks from so many backgrounds came together and created a family environment in the park through cooperation and mutual aid, can this work on a large level? People living in harmony, free of government and police?

Absolutely. As I was saying earlier, you don't need police around. Lets say a large group of us are gonna meet in the park to discuss issues and have a good time, show some love, why do cops need to be around to monitor that? Now the issues that we are talking about, unless you're part of the issue, then you don't need to be around. If this is something in the benefit of the people then let us handle our own affairs. This is our idea. Now, if you were invited, come in and sit down, but don't come in a show of force just because you have a gun and a badge. There is such a thing as doing your job and over doing your job. If we fill this park all the way around with people, what use are the police? If nobody's fighting, nobody's drinking, nobody's bothering anybody why do the police need to come in and stir up something? Yet because of the law that no one can be in the park after dark, they come in and disturb people. That's one of the stupidest laws I've ever seen in my life. That's taking away some of the greatest pastimes of people.



In closing what was an experience or memory that you have from the tent city that you will always carry with you?

I remember it, because being an ex black panther and a part of the movement that it had been a long time since I had done something like that, on that scale with people moving and interacting freely. I knew a few people and I met a lot of other folks who I got very acquainted with. Especially with Food Not Bombs and General Strike I really woke up and saw a lot of things for the first time in a while. I met a lot of people that are now my friends and probably will be for life, as long as I'm in Richmond. I don't get a chance to come by as often as I used to (to the park), but when I do I always look forward to seeing those faces. I know everyone has their own lives, but when we see each other there's always that common place that we will always know, always remember. We can always go back to that one spot, where it all started. This is where I got acquainted with some, where we first talked and got to know each other. This is what I'm always gonna remember. I also came closer with a lot of other people because I was very outspoken. I hope that the group members who I see often, and I always read their literature keep doing what they are. As for the older generation, I'm 52 now, it's good to see that this struggle is still carrying on. The group lives on. History repeats itself. Things aren't on the same scale as they were in the sixties, but the struggle lives. On that note I say peace and love to everybody.

A little while before the action we had an afternoon of banner making. General Strike members and other folks, activists, homeless came to stencil and paint their statements onto large thrift-bought curtains. The cooperation and sense of community there was hopeful. We spread everything out in a big parking lot behind the 805 W. Cary St. slum that some of us lived in. We joked about not getting spraypaint on the asphalt so they could trace the center of activity (one block away from Monroe park). The day was hot and the pavement hotter. We got sticky with sweat and spraypaint, stepped on broken glass, and laughed at our status of alarmist leftists. A status earned by our belief in everyone's right to basic survival and dignity.

August 28 came. Our tent city was situated along Laurel St. across from Johnson dorm, Sacred Heart cathedral, and the Mosque. Students started arriving with their parents, carrying their boxes into buildings across the street from their welcoming committee, a motley crew of scraggly activists, catholic workers, students and homeless. At noon there were about 20 people there-mostly members of General Strike and their friends. We began our occupation by lashing our banners to trees around the perimeter. All of the tents, poles and tarps were spread out across an area we felt was the safest, most visible and coherent space. We humbled with a lot of the tents, unaccompanied by directions and foreign to our hands. We were pretty comical, searching for mallets and railroad ties to peg down the tents, each person having a theory about the proper fabric/pole/peg configuration (How many anarchists does it take to put up a tent?...).



We gradually managed to erect them all. We were giddy. It was one thing to organize for this, but to finally see tents staked in the ground where poverty was criminalized daily was dumhounding. We were daring the city to evict us from our land, to deny our right to public space. We were still nervous though. Would more people come? Would the police come tonight?

At least we were already getting attention. People wandered up and asked what was happening. A bunch of stoned hippy-hop drum circle VCU kids wandered through. They sat down with us, played some drums and rambled idealistically about love and peace. I'm sure that was all easy for them to talk about. They all seemed pretty affluent and probably bought their herb with money from some part-time mall store job they had during high school, which their parents insist they get as a way to develop responsibility.

A responsibility grounded in the assumption that we must compete to provide for ourselves and that our obligation to our community was to be a well-greased citizen of the economic system.

If I seem a bit over-critical, it's from an impatience with expressions of shallow concern, a willingness to contribute to social change only if its convenient or comfortable. This is something I constantly try to keep aware of in my own actions. That kind of activism is only a small step away from charity, which I despise. Charity functions to assuage the guilt of those benefiting off of a system without challenging their privilege or comfort. Charity enables people to avoid direct interaction with oppressed groups, while perpetuating the myth that they have formed a meaningful human bond with those groups-through Fucking handouts, which only reinforce the roles of controller and controlled and put the charity-giver in a paternalistic position of power. Charity diverts energy from the effort to destroy unjust social structures into sustaining these unjust structures. I can not accept these substitutes for progress which have left us ill, complacent, and less than human.

At the most visible and approachable spot to the encampment, we placed a table with statements about goals of tent city, info about jail support, and various pamphlets. We tried to provide as much information as possible to curious passersby, and those who were joining the tent city. Needless to say, not everyone who came by was supportive. A burly white man with a pit bull debated with us. He "thought homelessness was a terrible thing", but couldn't understand how we could support the right for these "drug addicts, vagrants and nasty people" to use public space. He started out with the familiar "I know not all people homeless people are drunks or addicts..." and it just went downhill from there.

I think a small part of me felt the need to concede to some of his statements. I knew that a bunch of these folks were addicts, and I certainly felt threatened by some of them, having experienced first-hand the pervading chauvinism of the community; but I also knew that there was something flawed in his logic. There was some fundamental prejudice linking the common afflictions of the homeless population with their homeless condition. I couldn't articulate it, so I felt I might have to accept some of his basic assumptions. I wish I had thought to ask him at the time whether we should confiscate the homes of all alcoholics and addicts, since they didn't really deserve a home, or how likely he thought it was that many people would develop dependencies if their worldly security was taken from them. I wonder how many of his neighbors escaped criminal charges for alcohol and drug crimes simply because they had a home hiding them. I wonder how many of his neighbors would become dependent on some sort of drug if almost all semblance of the dependability of the world was taken from them.

How could I explain the amorphous thoughts stuck in my brain that stereotypical images of homelessness are an extension of classist perceptions. Perceptions which function to justify the creation and oppression of a working and homeless class by eroding our empathy, by saying "they deserve it." These thoughts were buried by my personal unfamiliarity with the individuals in Richmond's homeless community and my own socialization, which was still overriding the intuitive disagreements I had with paradigms of the status quo.

I've been in Richmond off and on now for four and a half to five years. The same people I see getting into programs and getting help are the same people I saw when I first came here. Over and over and over, yet they rest up and come right back. Somebody's trying to get help but they don't get it, but things are slowly changing. VCU has a little bit more of an open relationship with them (the homeless), but they need to keep the cops out of there. If anything goes wrong, you got VCU and city kops right there all the time. If a homeless person who works all day wants to drink a beer, where else is he gonna drink but in public. Where in the world is a homeless person gonna get \$95 to pay for a fine of drinking in public? It's the steady kicking, keeping someone on the bottom there. There are all kinds of situations that lead to this. Drug habits, family problems, employment problems. A person can very easily fall on hard times and get in a situation where being on the street saves some money for his family, his kids. You got a lot of people out there doing it. He doesn't need to be kicked, he needs to be picked up. The city of Richmond, VCU and the wealthy corporations are buying up all the property. I'll give you a perfect example, I know of two families in the Carver community that VCU has bought out, that's two families that are in the street now because of business interests.

What do you feel VCU has planned for the future of Carver? Do you think that there trying to systematically change the scope of the neighborhood with the influx of all the students?

That's exactly what's going on. VCU does not have enough space to accommodate their students as far as on campus housing goes. So they come up with a nice little plan, a proposal to come into the neighborhood (Carver) and renovate the community and make it an upstanding area. When they came in with the big VCU construction plans on Broad Street, that made it all pretty for them to come into the heart of Carver. But now that all that's done and the area is on the up and up, VCU needs space. Space that they don't have. So what's going on now is that poor people are being stepped on in the interest of VCU expansion. This really gives the younger generation the wrong impression. It's telling them that it is okay to step on some one just because they are not on your level. A lot of these kids have no social understanding. Why? Because age and experience in life always beats any hook.

What are your thoughts on the way the park was run the weekend of tent city? With the park assemblies, the communal sharing of work, park patrolling, the constant upkeep of the park. Do you feel like this is something that could work on a larger scale? A city scale? If so why?

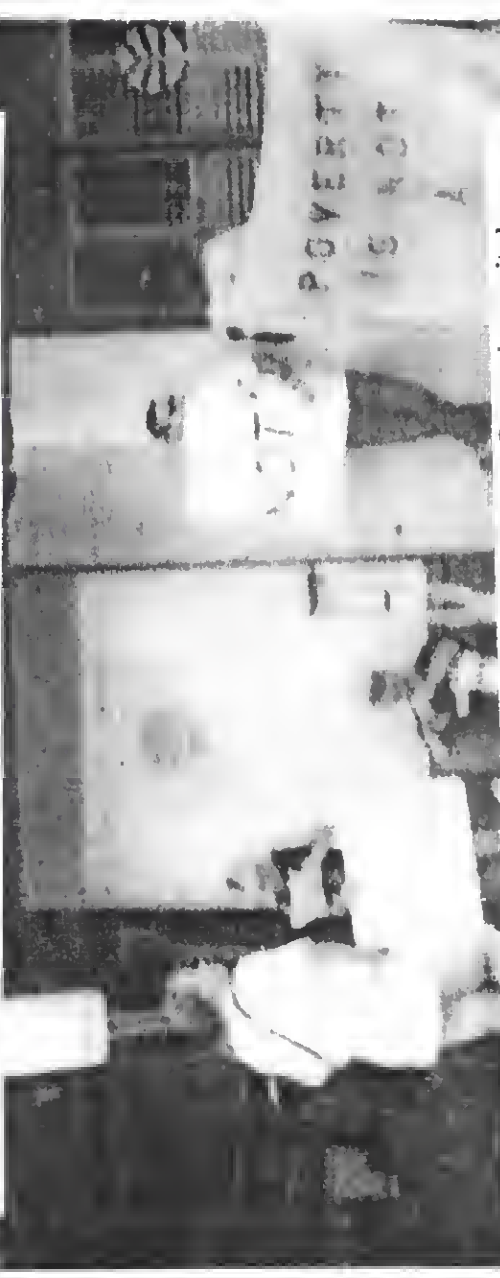
You know, that's a funny thing because my grandmother taught me a long time ago that the only way to get somewhere is through communication. Having traveled all over the world I know that if you can't talk with someone, discuss an issue, nothing ever gets solved. If you start to work together with people the first thing you need is a plan, you've got to follow through with it and you've got to have peace. It's gotta be all about love. If you put peace, love and harmony together in an idea, a plan then you can go through with it. You will attract certain people, both positive and negative. A positive will always overcome a negative. If you can overcome hatred and show love towards your fellow brother then we can make it in this world, and that is where we are at now.

For a long time Monroe Park has been a safe haven, a place where the homeless have come to rest, or sleep, up until a few years ago. What kind of forum or dialogue needs to be opened up where the decisions made about the park are open for all?



As being in the park, I remember the time when I was a kid, you could always go in the park and hang out all night long. In the country in the park there was a lake. It was the coolest place to hang out. Everybody was there, once you got older you could always go to the park and hang out all night long. All of your friends were there. Some of my experiences from hitchhiking during the earlier days in my life, a park was always the safest place to sleep. You could meet friends and do everything you wanted to do. If you made it to a park and you needed a layover you could always find somebody that would share something with you. Richmond was always known for Monroe Park. A person passing through he always, somebody else that he had met hitchhiking on the road would always direct you to Monroe Park. So when you fell off of the interstate, you could make it to Monroe Park. If I want to hitchhike and travel all over the world by my wit and grit, that's my choice. I remember students that was going to college back in the sixties, their parents paid their tuition and they would go out partying and mess up their allowance. So they would have to hang out in Monroe. They could always get some food from somebody in the park. So the park is part of an educational thing from back in the early days. Always a place to hang out, somebody would always have something to share. To take something that has meant something towards education and upgrade it to the level where you're sitting behind a desk putting something into law without the public having a right to voice their opinion on it is wrong. That's like me a working person, who works five or six days a week, taxation without representation. You can take my money, but when it comes down to me wanting one little thing you say no because I'm homeless. If they (VCU) really wanted to clear up the homeless why don't they take some of the buildings they are putting up. That's a job, an honest wage work at building some of the buildings they are putting up. That's a job, an honest wage and in the end maybe somebody will come out of homelessness. I don't see them doing anything like that, all I see is them taking the money and bringing more cops in.

People came and went. TV stations, local papers, and curious folk (in both senses) came by. Drawn by their excitement, anger, or inquisitiveness. People came for dinner, and some decided to stay with us. Everyone was uncertain of the police response. At dusk we gathered to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the Civil Rights march, and we formed a sizable circle. Everyone was still nervous, uncertain of each other's attitudes, of what was acceptable, who was running the show. It's no wonder, since many of the homeless shelters and service providers approach the homeless with a very paternalistic, disciplinary, and often dogmatic attitude. For those of us who weren't homeless, we had the same residue of social manner from family, school or work: waiting for orders, waiting for approval, waiting to be spoken to, playing our submissive roles very well.



It was somewhat strange that Kevin, a white guy from suburban Connecticut recited excerpts from Dr. King's speech, but maybe that's my internalized racial division speaking. Nevertheless, General Strike members didn't exactly provide a diversity of speakers. We wanted that diversity, as an invitation to those who had entered the tent city: to eradicate the idea that white men were and should be running the show. Fortunately, people felt welcome enough that a handful of people from the crowd accepted our invitation to speak to the gathering. The event stood in stark contrast to the weekly sermons which followed some food scrvings, where a charitable white man would dominate the audible space with religious rhetoric, inconducive to dialogue or inclusiveness-beaming his heroic exalted knowledge into the darkness of the needy primitive masses. The gathering that night was the beginning of our community-budding. It was the tentative start of acceptance and empowerment in a group of people largely inexperienced with that sort of environment.

During the commemoration, the sun had oozed closer to the horizon, sliding down in the thick summer air. As the day was making its transition to night, more folks started looking around for police. Every siren was suspect. Would they come? Would our encampment be declared criminal? Would our action be snuffed out along with the daylight? We had discussed, many times over, what to do when the police arrived, but none of that could mitigate the anticipation everybody felt. Our fears of police presence and arrest came from diverse places. Some of it was conditioned response from a long history of police antagonism. Some was fear of the unknown, fear of being on the other side of the law's bias. Then again, some reacted to the prospect as if it was a routine, accepted inevitability of living, akin to taking a shit... and that is what justified our action to me.



During the days we were there, we created a glimpse of the potential that dismantling this city holds for its inhabitants. The absurdity of the structures that govern our interactions became transparent. The degree to which certain social preconceptions created reactions that many people accept as being inevitable human foibles and inadequacies became clearer. As I interacted with my neighbors in the encampment, I noticed how much freer communication was, removed from the restrictive roles we normally assumed-roles which prescribed appropriate desires to individuals based on race, gender, sex, age, wealth, education, etc...In this disorientation we abandoned the covetousness of identity, learned through unquestioning acceptance of the true sense of identity and personal freedom, and that I felt that we were discovering the true sense of identity and personal freedom, and that it was linked to communal freedom, not the heroic individualism encouraged by the capitalist paradigm. We were experiencing the empowering reality that human relationships are largely determined by the structures that we decide to create. The priorities built into our structures will be emulated in our daily social interaction. We have the power to create alternate structures to foster relationships devoid of the discrimination that we now experience. Our necessary evils and inevitabilities of reality are fallacious in the respect that we determine the reality we live in.

In relation to VCU and their role here in the city, what level of abuse and intimidation have you witnessed at the hands of the VCU cops?

If a person has nowhere to go and he gets out and he's making a small wage (minimum) he's struggling to get by and if a person was making a decent wage then he could take it and make it. A lot of cops that I've known who've come to VCU to become cops is primarily because of their money situation. They get a better job, they get more income for their family, VCU is a large campus and they're buying up a majority of the area because they got backing. A college can always get money, that's the way of the world, education has become a very important issue. In the sixties, education was not the main priority. The main priority was the struggle against Vietnam. A lot of fathers who died in Vietnam were not around to raise kids, to make a big difference in their lives. The objective I have on that is people have got to pass by. Major generations were lost due to the Vietnam era. The US along with the power struggle for big business and money have passed the little people over. They are steady stepping on them. Not that education isn't important, because I have a kid of my own in college. But the point is if you're a big corporation who has plenty why step on the little people? You're taking what little bit of dignity they do have and kicking them further down. Brotherly love is just gone. Money has taken over the love. As for the sixties everybody was saying peace and love, now it's like I got mine, you got yours.

Money is being donated by people, and I know money is being donated, but where is that money going? Where is that money going? It's going into people's pockets. In other words there are kickbacks all the way around. VCU doesn't want to deal with the issues because when all their backers come out they don't want to see people laying out on park benches, sleeping in the park. If you want to do something about it, help the person. Don't kick him further down help him up. I've yet to see one VCU cop, one dean, one professor that saw a person homeless in the park to come out and say look come live with me for a couple of weeks, I've got a job for ya, clean my yard, give me an honest days pay. You've got plenty of people here in the park that will work, all they want is a decent days wage, instead of the temp service. But you tell them to go to the temps. You can't even afford an apartment off of what the temp service pays. So how can you come out of poverty? The landlords in some areas are buying all the property and you go and have committee meetings for an area, nobody knows about it, that's undermining the community. In other words, you got the money, you got the authorities, you're buying up all the property and sitting on it. Instead of increasing the neighborhood for somebody who is just barely making it, instead of putting some money into renovating old houses, so those people can continue to live where they are, you're kicking them into the street with nowhere to go. But they might have been there ten to fifteen years in that same run down house, the landlord is getting fat but this is all that this person can afford. So why come in and buy up a house that somebody's living in and then what does he do? Then the city comes in and condemns the house, you're out on the streets. The landlord gives you an eviction notice, he gets the money, you get nothing, nowhere to live.

Interview with Charles Cousins, 52, participant at tent city.

"...we've been around social struggles for quite some time, how do you feel things have changed since the sixties, have things deteriorated?"

The biggest difference between the sixties and today is that was when blacks and whites were coming together. You had one power that was in control, and the right to move around was different then. You couldn't go into certain places based on your color. Now you got the right to go anywhere you want to go. In the sixties people stuck together more because there was a struggle for freedom. Take the hippies for example, they were free, fighting for freedom. You had Vietnam going on, people were dying senseless deaths, although I was a part of Vietnam. Today there is no unifying cause. People have a tendency to turn their back on issues, they say well if it doesn't effect me I just let it go. It's a lot easier to turn your back on things and it's all about money now. In the sixties everybody was just getting by, the jobs weren't paying as much, one family was struggling just as much as another one. If you moved into a neighborhood, whether you were black or white, if it was low income, you could always knock on your neighbor's door and get something. As for today, neighborly love in the communities is gone. People need to get back and stick together, come back and be united.

"What made you want to come out and participate in tent city, why did you feel it was important?"

Well the homeless here in Richmond is something that a lot of people is making money off of. The homeless people, where I come from being born in the country (about 103 miles from Richmond) there's not a homeless person out there. If you don't have a place to stay somebody somewhere will open up their house and give you a place to stay. They never let you suffer, they are just open hearted. Compared to the city where people just say forget about it, he's probably on drugs or something like that. What we need to do is think about doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. If you were in that situation you wouldn't want somebody to pass you by. Why would you turn your back on somebody whose a little different then you, that person just might be going through a hard time. So you need to take a little time to help everybody out, and basically that's what I feel like everybody needs to do.

By the end of the weekend we had lived together for three days. We had argued. We had emphatically agreed. We had a large meeting based on non-hierarchical consensus structures. We discussed city politics, religion, philosophy. We experienced a member going through seizures. We experienced an outbreak of drunken helligence, and settled it, peacefully. The honesty and equality with which we interacted left a mark in me, put a mask on this acid worm that turns in my stomach when society says by definition that I should be warm and content.

At the time I don't think we realized the potential for the action. We didn't plan for the aftermath. At the beginning, we had no idea what kind of momentum we would build, and didn't fully prepare to focus it. We delivered our demands to the university and the university said our demands were too vague, or incorrectly directed towards the university. I let insult reduce our convictions and the paternalistic attitude of the establishment activate my internalized, pacifying belief of inadequacy.

The University made a public relations stint at bargaining with us and we didn't know how to hack them into a corner where they would have to seriously confront our demands. So they publicly wrote us off and made themselves out to be the victims of a reactionary, uninformed, naïve group of youngsters and kooks. Our inefficacy was directly related to our personal politics. Most of us didn't see liberal reform as progress, so there was a real lack of commitment to developing a strategy for bargaining with the University. We should have confronted this in the beginning, realizing that we didn't care about bargaining and using the event to create more of a ruckus and confrontation concerned with getting attention and raising uncomfortable questions.

Looking back though, I see the reaction it stirred in the community, the attitude of defiance that it revealed, how it affected my beliefs and commitment, how it opened dialogue about the attitudes of moneyed-interests towards community welfare, and I see it as a slow-burning catalyst feeding a reaction that will result in something beyond liberal, accommodationist policies. I look at the revealing nature of the action as more powerful than any grudgingly-made university policies.

It's formed a tattoo on my memory. I had scars that were pinching and binding my thoughts, words and movements-whose shapes I could not see, and I let them dictate my growth. They convinced me that I was hobbled. But now that I understand that these are scars and not wounds, I see them as the ornament of flesh rebuilt and resilient, a testament to the blood of hope and power that is resident in people, that brings stubborn, inspired life, beautiful in its dogged insistence on love and freedom.

Our humanity has never been improved by anyone that believed "that's just the way things are." Accept y(our) potential and act on it,

Yvonne

Group Hopes to Cause Flap With Tent City

If you build a tent city, will they come?

The General Strike Collective, a local political activist group, is planning to construct a tent city in Monroe Park from Friday, Aug. 28 through Monday, Aug. 31, the first weekend of VCU's fall term.

While that weekend means moving into dorms and getting ready for classes for VCU's student body, according to Collective member Shawn O'Hern, it's also the time when VCU police crack down on homeless people who populate the park and other areas near the VCU campus, such as Grace Street.

"We're turning Monroe Park into a temporary living quarters to raise awareness of VCU's anti-poor policies," O'Hern says.

In addition, the tent city protest is being organized to oppose "VCU's expansion into low-income communities, and how it affects the communities and limits low-income housing opportunities in these communities," O'Hern says. "There isn't a process where VCU asks the residents of the communities [their opinion on expansion]."

Oregon Hill won a contentious fight several years ago to keep VCU from expanding south into that neighborhood, but the university is edging into Carver and Jackson Ward to the north.

Don Gehring, vice president of external relations for VCU, is not concerned about the protest, and thinks the Collective's efforts are misdirected. "This is a misguided missile. It's just nonsense. These are folks who haven't bothered to ask anyone about anything. You've just got to look at something like this and wonder. Just wonder. That's all you can do."

O'Hern's group has only eight members at this time, but they're hoping for a considerably bigger turnout for the tent city weekend, a mixed bag that will include a ceremony in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement, and some folk music. "We're trying to make a stand, and we're trying to enjoy ourselves," O'Hern says.

"VCU police control the park. We're wondering what the police response is going to be," O'Hern says. "We're hoping we do get some sort of response." —MARK STROH

3-day protest at park nears end

BY MARK HOLMBERG
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

A three-day camp-in protest in Monroe Park in support of homeless people was scheduled to wrap up today with a march across the Virginia Commonwealth University campus.

One of the protest's leaders, Shawn O'Hern, 22, a dishwasher and member of a group called the General Strike Collective, said last night he hopes for a meeting today with VCU President Eugene Trani to discuss the plight of the homeless.

"We want VCU to be more proactive," O'Hern said.

He said he also wants to discuss VCU's expansion into the Carver area north of Broad Street.

He said he expects the march to get under way today about 10:15 a.m.

VCU officials believe the protesters' concerns are "misguided and groundless," a university spokesman said last night, pointing out that Monroe Park is under the jurisdiction of the city.

A prepared statement from VCU noted that "while the university has tried to initiate conversations with these individuals, they have expressed no interest in discussions, nor have they been specific about their concerns."

Nearly a dozen tents had been pitched in the park as evening approached yesterday, and between 50 and 75 people were taking part in the protest, which began Friday.

O'Hern said between 100 and 150 people, a majority of them homeless, spent the night in the park Saturday.

As the protest began Friday in the park off Belvidere Street, most of the early participants were college students and activists who spent the first hours singing, talking and waiting for the police.

O'Hern said yesterday there had been no arrests. He said the number of homeless taking part in the demonstration was growing.

"Once they saw us make it through the first night, they came on out."

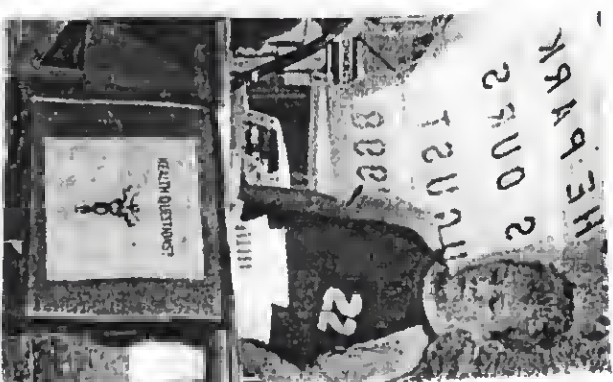
O'Hern said some participants are considering making the tent city permanent, adding that a decision on maintaining a permanent presence in the park has not been made.

One of the participants, 32-year-old John C. Capps, said the protesters were making their presence felt.

"We're kicking butt, that's what's going on," said Capps, who said he's been homeless since a wood-cutting injury recently knocked him out of work.

The General Strike Collective is a "grass-roots revolutionary organization committed to combating injustice and oppression in our society," according to the Richmond group's newsletter.

While the usual crowd of home-



3-day protest in Monroe Park nears end

▼ PARK FROM PAGE B1

less camped around the Daily Planet on Canal Street Friday, they started shifting to the park Saturday. There was plenty of food and drink, conversation, bongos, guitars and sympathizers.

"It's almost like a bed and breakfast," O'Hern said.

"The whole thing is about opening a dialogue. People are interested in what's going on. They come on out, and it's an interesting atmosphere, and they stay."

John R. Franklin, a 49-year-old homeless man from South Side who says he lives outdoors to help his brethren on the street, said he stayed awake all night Friday.

"I didn't know if they were going to run us out."

The next day he still was hustling about, getting new tents set up and getting to know his new friends.

"No drunks, no drugs, no violence," he summed up, pleased with the by-the-book civil disobedience.

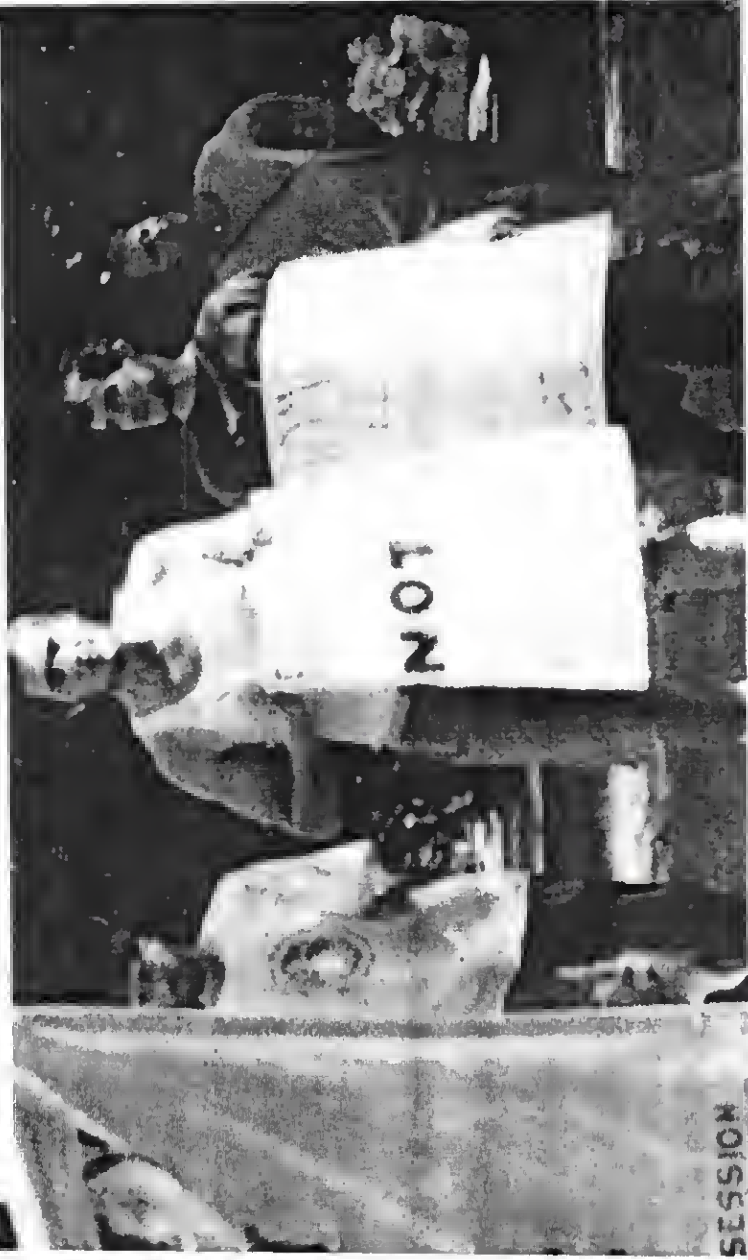
Times-Dispatch Staff Writer Bill Wasson contributed to this report.

My new friend, Curtis, and I decided that we weren't satisfied. We decided to head back out to the park that night and deliberately break their law that no one could be there after dark. We were so inspired by the weekend that it would have broken our hearts to allow it to go back to business as usual because the press had only covered the tent city, and would not be out there every night to see the police waking folks up and ticketing them or sending them to jail because they couldn't find a better or safer place to sleep. We got ticketed and in that process, a police officer said something very telling and inspiring: "The Mayor told us not to bother y'all while the tent city was going on, but now that that's over, it's back to normal." It was inspiring to see that the powers that be in Richmond were soaked sufficiently by a bunch of people coming together that they deliberately decided not to enforce their own bullshit laws.

We went back out the next night. We were never bothered, though the police repeatedly drove, walked or rode by and looked at us. That morning, Curtis and I took a swim in the river and headed out to DC in what turned out to be the new worst hitch of my life. For the past year and a half, hardly a week has gone by that I haven't thought about and drawn inspiration from the tent city. Recently, in the streets of Seattle, the feeling of freedom I experienced in Richmond revisited me. A month or so later, on a sledding hill in DC, when a few guys stole a huge tarp from a construction site and we (about all 30 of us, mostly strangers) all piled on and flew down the hill together, screaming. I felt the same warmth and sense of acceptance I felt at tent city. When we get those feelings on a daily basis, wherever we go, we'll know we have won, that the powers that be no longer infringe on our lives, that the common good, rather than individual advancement has pushed itself to the forefront of impulses dominating our actions.

Love and RRRRRRRRRRRRRRevolution ;

Ben



Interview with Elana Sheep, 20. VCU student and participant of tent city.

You had just arrived in Richmond from a very small Virginia town, tent city was amongst your first experiences in the city, what did you make of the scene that day?



It was my first weekend at VCU. I had walked by tent city several times and wanted to stop and see what was going on, but I'm a shy kid, so I just kept walking by. One of my walk-bys was interrupted by someone who thought she recognized me, and she was talking to Kevin Marques, so I found out what was going on from them and took some literature to read. I was confused at first, because when I had just been walking by and had a vague idea of what was going on, I thought all the people in the park were homeless, but after I met some it seemed like there were more students. So, between visiting tent city, reading radical propaganda, and hanging out in the Rhodes hall courtyard, I had reached the conclusion that everyone in Richmond was more interesting than ninety-nine percent of the people I had met in my very small Virginia town high school. I kept telling everyone from home how much I loved VCU and Richmond already (although I started hating it about two weeks later). So, I guess on a pretty superficial level, what I made of the scene was, "hey, there's stuff going on here that I haven't really been exposed to before and I should become a part of it" and I really wanted to make friends with a lot of the people I met, but ended up not doing it until a year later. I don't think I understood the implications at the time of what tent city represented on a larger (societal) scale: but it did introduce me to some of the problems the homeless face and VCU causes, but that was about it.



What did you learn about VCU during tent city? How did some of that information effect the way you perceive the university today?

I guess the basic conclusion I reached at tent city, and the opinion I still hold today, can be summed up as "VCU is evil." I wanted to drop out after the first semester, but reluctantly came to the conclusion that, since VCU isn't costing me anything besides books and fees, I may as well stick around and get a free education, plus I've figured out who the good teachers are now. Anyway, all I learned from tent city was that VCU likes to kick homeless people out of Monroe Park, particularly if new students and their parents are coming to town, and at the time I was like "well, that sucks, homeless people should be able to sleep wherever they want," but I didn't realize that I had only seen the surface of what VCU does to the non-campus community around it. They cover every detail too. For now, they just make prospective students take the Boulevard exit and drive down Monument so it looks like VCU is in a fancy neighborhood, gentrifying and "beautifying" the rest of Richmond is still a work in progress. Eventually they'll tear down the rest of Carver and beautiful historic Jackson Ward and put up some luxury vinyl siding so it'll be safe to let newcomers take the real (Belvidere) exit. After only two years here, I feel much more like a Richmonder than like a VCU student and that's not to say that there aren't plenty of good people working within the system, but as an entity, VCU is still evil.

The hitch down to the tent city in Richmond was the shittiest, most hellish hitch I had ever undertaken up to that point in my life. (Now, 1 1/2 years later, I have had plenty that beat it out) It didn't really have to be, if I had let myself sleep, but I wanted to get down there Friday evening. It was only a 5-6 hour drive from the Vince Lombardi Rest area on the New Jersey Turnpike, so when my buddy Linke dropped me off there at 8am I figured I had plenty of time to get down there, besides, there were dozens of trucks parked there. After around 7 hours it became apparent that there was so damn many trucks there because they were stuck for the weekend. So I gave up on the trucks and immediately got a ride with a 4-wheeler. I'd been partying all night every night with Linke, so I passed out after a few miles, only to be woken up 50 miles down the road to the driver pushing 40 dollars into my hands and pushing me out of the car. I made pretty good time until I hit Jessup, Maryland where I blah, blah, blah... Let me put it plainly: I got to Monroe park in the early afternoon after giving all my money away, sleeping standing up, seeing my best friend drive by me at 4am, while I held a sign that said her name, and generally hitting the bottom of the abyss of staggering exhaustion and depression that goes along with all-day-and-night hitches.

I want to say that I was greeted warmly, that I was immediately impressed by the atmosphere of co-operation and unity and anarchy in the park as soon as I reeled in there, but I can't remember much except saying hello to a few people and passing out on a towel for most of the afternoon. Somebody woke me and I reluctantly got up for dinner, which I seem to remember to be real good, but I'm not that sure.

To tell the truth, I don't remember all that much about the specifics of the weekend. I remember running over to the 805 West Cary house to get supplies pretty often, falling for Sera, a girl I just met, and have since become good friends with, breaking up a fight on Saturday night when a couple of people that had drunk themselves stupid started some bullshit over \$5 dollars with a guy who was hanging out. I remember the courage others showed in putting themselves in the middle of flying death threats and possibly fists. I remember all of us taking care of each other and ourselves for that weekend (with help from FNB). I remember an awesome game of whiffball with a bunch of older guys who were living on the streets who hadn't played a game like that for years. We had meetings discussing what we would do if the police came and tried to bust us up, which they never did. The meetings were great. Since we didn't have much else to do besides hang out in the park, the facilitation was real loose and people were allowed to ramble on and on about whatever. Eventually, Monday morning rolled around and with it the march to the president of VCU's office which would be the culmination of the weekend of action.

A disappointingly small number of people showed up for the march, around 20-30, I think, but we made enough noise and ruckus to make up for it. We ended the march at the president's office, at which point we demanded to have the meeting that they had been giving us the turnaround about. Our concerns were that VCU's police force unfairly targeted homeless, patrolled Monroe Park at night, which is city property, and that VCU was eating up housing and community space in the surrounding neighborhoods to create more parking. They granted us an audience with some muckety-muck who didn't give a damn about what our representatives told him, ended the meeting before they were done talking and never responded to our concerns.

thirsty.

Behold, the Tent City and its Civil Disobedience

By W.B. Braxton-Bantu

When the sun rises in the East and sets in the West,
'Tis time for all this city's parks to shut down.

If this city's brigades of men and women,
Clad in blue uniforms,
Should be driving or cycling through these parks,
Let no unsuspecting soul be found.

It was this past August the 28th a courageous band of you,
Known as General Strike, Food Not Bombs, and some others
Defied this legal sunset rule.

There were no incidents or police hassle, harassment, or arrests.
This Friday night's matters transpired cool.

Behold, there stood in this city's street light, in Monroe Park,
You, Tent City, as a living testament of
Modern-day civil disobedience and protest.

All praises are due to Allah or Jehovah, or to the Higher Power
the activists profess.

Thus the weekend before the university would open.
Students, parents, the homeless, and any wayfarer could visit or lodge in
Monroe Park's Tent City.

It was an innovative, conscientious, sociopolitical, and spiritual gesture
That involved the well-known ASWAN defenders, students.
And those sympathizing with this city's policies for the poor and homeless!

You work with kids at Carver Elementary School. What impact do you feel that VCU's ongoing expansion into their community will have on those children's future?

I have a serious love/hate relationship with my job. I would never do it again, but I've learned plenty of lessons here. Basically, I serve as PR (public relations) for VCU. They pay me a "living stipend" to go work/volunteer for other people (primarily at Carver Elementary School) to make it look like VCU is full of do-gooders giving back to the community. On one hand, serving as PR for VCU sucks. On the other hand, they're paying me to go volunteer for other people, and I would much rather help those people than help VCU. Theoretically, I can even have a positive impact on a lot of kids, though not in the way VCU intends I'm sure. Most of the people running the VCU program are the ones I referred to earlier as "good people working within the system." It would be nice if VCU trusted poor black communities enough to just give them money and let them do what they want with it, but since they're only willing to give it to middle class VCU students, I may as well try to use it for good. If I had known what I was getting into when I applied for and accepted this job, however, I probably would not have gotten into it, but as far as VCU's impact on the Carver kids, it's very much about image and making VCU look good, more than it is about actually helping a community, and it's very much about keeping the money and power in VCU's pockets and hands so that they can provide the kind of help they want to, rather than what might actually be best for non-VCU communities. Their programs might help more kids succeed within a system they had no part in designing, or it might help some of them get to college and get a "decent job" when they grow up, but VCU certainly will not give a struggling community assistance it could use to grow stronger on its own. VCU does not want a poor community or a community primarily of people of color to unite and succeed on its own, because that is not in VCU's best interests. I mean, even in a purely aesthetic sense, if Carver and Jackson Ward beautified their own neighborhoods along the Belvidere exit, VCU still wouldn't want prospectives to take the exit because white students would be confused and frightened by black people coming out of nice houses, and black students might get "ideas." y'know? So if VCU's efforts to expand and assist in communities like Carver succeed, they will succeed on VCU's terms. They might help kids walk a straight line and stay out of trouble, which some people will view as a success, but its much more of a success for VCU (and maintaining the status quo) than it is actually a success for the kids.



What means do you as a student feel could help establish a sense of solidarity between the students of VCU and the homeless population of Monroe Park?

I honestly have very few ideas in this department right now. I just talked a (possibly homeless) man at Food Not Bombs in Atlanta for a good hour. He was very hostile, while repeatedly telling me how much he loved me, but he did say some things which were pretty disappointing and upsetting on subjects I've been thinking a lot about lately. Food Not Bombs might be a good example to use, because the rest of the VCU students are even further away from anything remotely resembling solidarity. Anyway this guy, Tony, kept saying that I didn't understand him, didn't feel him, that Food Not Bombs was sharing food for the wrong reasons. We were having some communication difficulties, but that was more of a personal thing. The problems with Food Not Bombs are on a much larger scale, and there are a lot of them. Basically there's just a huge gap between the people who serve and the people who eat. The people who serve usually try not to feel it, and some of the people who eat don't care, but the more thoughtful of the people who eat, like this guy Tony, definitely feel it, and it's a problem. Tony's perception seemed to be that we were doing this as a "charitable" act, in the sense that it made us feel good about ourselves. I think this is accurate for church and other feeding programs, but food not bombers tend to have a much more realistic perception of the inequalities that play a role and the reasons for the need to share food with others, and why those people don't have food to begin with. On the other hand, food not bombers still tend to be middle-class white kids who have never had to sleep on the streets or depend on other peoples charity to survive. This creates basic communication difficulties we don't know how to talk to people who come from different class/race/etc backgrounds, and we need to figure it out soon, because we are supposed to be working with these people and building communities, not just acting like a charity. One idea that really intrigues me, which came up in discussion about establishing a nonprofit to assist fnb is the possibility of being able to hire people, who might currently be eating at fnb, to work in actual paying positions which could also help fnb, but that's just fnb stuff. As far as the general VCU student population, I don't think solidarity with the homeless is something most of them care about at all. So educating students should be a priority. For those who do care, protests (tent city anyone?) are about all I can think of.

past the heavy burden of prejudice.

Thousands of Richmonders are virtually on the brink of becoming homeless. Will future Richmonders who become unsheltered have to experience the same awakening nightmare of my buddy down at Hardee's or any other currently homeless individual that is repeatedly denied assistance and shelter? The average homeless person is

no longer the neighborhood drunk. It could be your cousin, nephew, niece, uncle, aunt, brother, sister, father, or even your mother. And is often prompted by a entanglement of a variety of factors in today's society including job loss, addiction, mental illness, affordable or available low-income housing, employment opportunity, break-up of a relationship, domestic violence, or natural disaster.

Why can't VCU and the City lend a helping

hand instead of a foot? Doesn't this kind of insensitivity perpetrate extreme conditions, hardships, and arrests. Enough is enough! The homeless have had it! They're taking back their rights, dignity, and their compassionate park! When Jesus came 2,000 years ago, he could've been anything he wanted, but choose to be homeless. I

wonder why? -- John M. Fellis ASWAN

there were well over 200 (year-round) emergency bed spaces.

Like a alcoholic in denial for decades, some City Council members claims there is no need for an increase in emergency shelter. BOLONEY! Maybe we need to call a few council members back to earth! And then cruise around to certain locations within the city that they know so much about.

The City Government response is that of the City Police, making police sweeps, locking up people who are repeatedly refused shelter and without options have to find public spaces. They must hide to evade arrest because it is illegal to sleep in public. If you're homeless in Richmond, it's a crime. This in itself, is civil obedience and forces defiance of city ordinances.

Complexity of those unsheltered in the 90's provides no solution to end homelessness. We can, however, alleviate the problem, but obstacles in alleviation are much more profound than in 1975, due to the NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard), restrictive policies, racism, greed, selfishness, and attitudes where its "us" verses "them" and them are undeserving unwanted, outsiders.

There is this veteran homeless that many Richmonders have seen sitting beside his

"caboo" box by Hardee's near Boulevard and Broad Streets. I've talked to him on many occasions, giving him a dollar whenever I had it. He claims that he doesn't drink or do any drugs. I believed him. An old man in his 50s' or 60s', usually humorous, and soft spoken (till you asked why won't he try to go to a shelter), his response; "I'd ain't going to them damn shelters" as the volume in his voice goes up quite a bit. He had bad experiences of continuously being refused shelter, and he claims that he's never going to a shelter again, while feeling self-worthiness, betrayal by the country that he laid down his life for, and victimized by society. In a way, he's right. He fought for his country and this is how he is rewarded?

On July 28, 1997, Richmond City Council passed one of the most prejudiced laws in Richmond recent history, one part of the three part zoning ordinances had since been repealed (church feeding restrictions). But City Council has not repealed the last by-right zone for homeless shelter and services, all parts of any zoning ordinances that prejudicially targets Richmond citizens (no matter the color, creed, or how much money they have in their pocket) must be repealed. On December 26, 1996, Another ASWAN Co-Convenor Matthew Hilgeford

wrote to Bill Veno (Senior Planner-Department of Community Development concerning Richmond's Downtown Master Plan, the closing paragraph stings real reality like that of a bee sting. His closing statement included the following:

In closing the understanding we have of the past as well as the present, know it is the policy of a minority of influential people who are standing in the background, using their influence on people in high offices of City Government to pursue policies in order to move the homeless out of the downtown area. They have gone to great lengths in offering to donate their private wealth to charities to control public money to do the same. It is these people and their unfounded fear and prejudices that have exacerbated the homeless issue and the poverty-stricken citizens of the City of Richmond. Your "Homeless Issue Draft for Downtown Plan" is segregation in the purest form, superficially appealing but beneath, clusters good citizens of the City of Richmond into a caste. And casted out, the homeless and the poverty-stricken to sustain as they always have in the



What was one moment or experience from tent city that you will always carry with you?

There are a few fond and weird memories... lots of people I noticed and/or briefly spoke to, all of whom I wanted to befriend, most of whom I didn't speak to again for about a year. Which suggests that you were probably right; tent-city must have stirred up some ideas in me that didn't actually surface for a year. Meeting Becky was fun, because she denies this but the first week I was at VCU everyone was trying to figure out if I was gay or not. So, I was sitting by myself at tent city and Becky came over and asked me to accompany her to the bathroom, safety in numbers and all that, and then warned me to stay away from a sketchy guy in the park, and then immediately started talking about gay stuff to see how I would respond so I shared a similar anecdote about a gay friend and then she of course encouraged me to bring him to SMSA (Sexual Minority Student Association) some time. Then later during tent city, one night I had intended to actually go to bed at a somewhat reasonable hour. I was about to say my goodnights when this guy shows up, claiming he saw us on the news and thought it was really great and so he walked, all the way from Mechanicsville or some distant suburb like that, so he could be a part of it too. Then a minute later he starts spouting nonsense like "women shouldn't have the right to vote." I might not have had my views challenged much or formulated any coherent political stances (still haven't), but I wasn't that dumb. So we stayed up all night debating with this lunatic and I got no sleep. Also meeting that guy Curtis with LSD tattooed on his forehead was a real "Welcome to Richmond" kinda thing.



Chris Woodford/Concord Health Times

POVERTY NOT A CRIME. Members of General Strike spent the weekend in Monroe Park to protest the treatment of the homeless and disadvantaged.

Group camps out in park as a protest of treatment of homeless

Dusty Smith and Ben Wasson
CT News Editors

People walking around campus might have noticed that Monroe Park was looking more like a refugee camp than a city attraction last weekend.

Members of General Strike, A.S.W.A.N. (A Society Without a Name for People Without a Home) city residents, homeless people and VCU students pitched tents and rolled out sleeping bags last Friday as 55 to 75 people drew attention to the problems faced by the city's disadvantaged and homeless.

The group, which stayed all weekend, day and night, also protested the special attention they said the homeless receive in the park from law enforcement.

"The cops are really, really rude. [They] single out the homeless and leave the students alone," one protester said.

Yvonne Sorovaco, a VCU biology student and member of the group, said the police stepped up harassment of the homeless in the park recently because they did not want the incoming students and parents to see the homeless.

"We feel that this is public territory," she said. "This time of year the police get concerned with moving the homeless people."

Kevin Marques, a history and secondary education junior at VCU and a group member, said the three-day sleepover was a success.

"It doubled in size since yesterday," Marques said Sunday. "The sense of community in this park is wonder-

ful. It's ours, it's everybody's."

The police left the protesters alone over the weekend, declining to arrest anyone for illegally camping in the park. That was not the end of the group's good fortune; the bathrooms located in Monroe Park were not closed after dark.

But the bathrooms were without shower facilities so, after a couple of days of camping, "we're getting kinda crusty," Sorovaco said.

Not everyone in the park saw the demonstration as positive.

Thomas Coleman, a music student at VCU, said that closing the park at 11 p.m. is "probably a good idea."

Another VCU music student, Anthony Conover, voiced his concern about safety.

"If you walk through [the park] at the wrong time, you could be in trouble."

Gil Quick, a 35-year-old nurse and father of two children, also said safety was a significant issue.

When we try to take children to the park, homeless people will be drinking and exposing themselves [to us]," Quick said. "They don't have any boundaries."

Marques said that the protest demonstrated that the homeless were not a safety concern.

"If we can do this for a weekend and not have any problems, why can't others?" he said.

While Quick said something like last weekend's protest does more harm than good, there are other avenues to help the homeless.



"While the university has tried to imitate conversations with these individuals, they have expressed no interest in discussion, nor been specific about their concerns."

But on the flip side, a growing number of VCU faculty members have a different perspective towards policies and procedures in dealing with the homeless, including its own underground network to help the homeless (not naming names), which has contributed to successes of the ASWAN group and the empowerment of the homeless community.

People complained about homeless people urinating in the park, but they failed to check and see if the bathrooms are "chain-locked," or to check if the person was a student, or from a group home, or maybe a politician. It is true, for the first time in years, the compassionate park bathrooms are open 24 hours a day. Several months back, it took an outcry from homeless advocates to open the bathrooms during the day. During this year until May, Food Not Bombs, and churches would feed the homeless at the park while the bathrooms where unnecessary chained-locked 24 hours each day.

To date, 34 cities have been included in ASWAN's study, none of the cities lacked adequate emergency shelter bed spaces in proportion to the estimated homeless population, as in Richmond. Nashville, Tenn. is 8% larger in metropolitan size, but had 991 (year-round) emergency bed spaces compared to Richmond's current 169. Knoxville, Tenn. slightly smaller than Richmond had over 600. Mobile AL, much smaller (about 50 percent), had 331.

Birmingham AL, did not list exact amount of (year-round) emergency bed spaces in their Consolidated Plan. In that city between 1987 and 1993, the homeless population increased 62% percent, but shelter bed spaces

increased by 80 percent, giving a false perception of a decrease in the homeless population, due to the fact that fewer individuals were forced into the streets. In Richmond, (year-round) emergency bed spaces have been on a decline. In 1975,

Why can't VCU and the city lend a helping hand instead of a foot?

Dear Editor:

I felt most inclined of writing to Voice because of the newspaper standing in printing the real reality and because other newspapers might suppressed information from my letter due to the harsh reality and bureaucratic favoritism. The opinion in this letter is of my own personal expression.

The Park Is Our's!

It's everybody's park! Not just the city government or its cloudy joint ownership with VCU. The history of Monroe Park is deeply rooted with the homeless community for over 200 years. A place where food, clothes, blankets (which some people call prizes) are given out to the homeless, the compassionate park had been quarters for the homeless for centuries until about 10 years ago. Booker T. Washington was homeless in Richmond before he moved to Hampton. he had set foot in compassionate park and possibly used "OUR" park to lay his head.

On August 28 through the 31st, there was a weekend take over of compassionate park. Tent City was formed. General Strike Collective organized the take over. Friday, while setting up tents, organizers called VCU Police to inform them of their plans to sleep in the park the entire weekend in violation of city ordinance. VCU Police responded with threats of arrests. As organizers, homeless people, college students, homeless advocates, and members of Carver Community waited to be dragged off by the police, the police never came. By Saturday night, those who were committing civil disobedience had climb from about 50 to over 100. Everyone felt energized empowerment, it was like that of a giant first family reunion with sweet victory and compassionate park was safe.

Tent City couldn't have came at a better time coupled with harassment of homeless people, the expansion into poor neighborhoods with no plans to replace those displaced and who are extremely poor, and ASWAN's study of medium size U.S. Cities in their addressing homelessness.

VCU in recent years has grown, taking up larger tracts of the downtown area, the college is situated in the most extensive urban area in the state. State law doesn't protect citizens when a college takes over neighborhoods like it does in public housing or local government.

Homeless people have been cited merely for walking on the public sidewalk on VCU. As long as people are dressed in regular clean clothes, they're not harassed for doing the same thing. VCU efforts to keep homeless people "out of site, out of mind" especially when the student's parents are in town, is contemptuous.

VCU's highest ranking officials excepting a phone call from a homeless representative (before Tent City) is as good as a Monday morning joke down at the office over coffee and donuts. Long before the weekend take

over of compassionate park, Tent City organizers through phone calls, repeatedly attempted to set the stage for a meeting with high ranking VCU officials, only to received nothing but runarounds. Yet, VCU prepared statement stated the following:

NEWS RELEASE NEWS RELEASE NEWS RELEASE NEWS RELEASE

MONROE PARK TENT CITY, ARRESTS EXPECTED

Friday, August 28th through Monday, August 30th some Richmonders will be turning Monroe Park into a temporary living quarters to protest VCU's anti-poor policies, including the harassment and attempted relocation of homeless citizens and expansion into low-income communities.

During the days and weeks before the beginning of the fall semester at VCU, campus cops increasingly harass homeless people in Monroe Park and the areas around VCU. The homeless community knows this hostile crackdown as "sweep season." On the institutional level, VCU played a major role in the attempt to move the Daily Planet Resource Center to the "out of sight, out of mind" location at 17th and O streets. The Tent City will also highlight VCU's expansion into the Carver community and it's detrimental effects on the community fabric and availability of low-income housing close to the city center.

The weekend encampment in the park will include events celebrating the power and unity of grassroots mobilizations against poverty and inequality. Friday there will be a commemoration of the Civil Rights March on Washington D.C. in which Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "*I Have a Dream*" speech. Sunday an anti-imperialist folk band will sing out against injustice. Meals will be served throughout the weekend.

The Tent City will continue after dark at which time it is illegal to remain in the park as an act of civil disobedience. General Strike Collective is organizing jail support for the possibilities of arrest. All risking arrest must make a commitment to non-violence.

General Strike Collective initiated the organizing for the Tent City; a grassroots non-hierarchical organization committed to combating injustice and oppression in our society. We work on programs and actions that are concerns to the community we live and work in.

Contact person: Shawn O'Hern phone number 355-6914
Member of General Strike Collective

Monroe Park Tent City

Starts Friday, August 28, 1998 12:00 PM
Through Monday Morning, August 31, 1998
Daily Meals Supplied by *Food Not Bombs*



What is Tent City?
A Tent City is where any large group of individuals gather in a single location and utilize it as a temporary living quarter in protest of an oppressive entity. Here in Richmond, for the last 30 years, V.C.U. has been steadily developing its campus at the expense of the city's poorest citizens. By partaking in a Tent City, we hope to build an alliance of concerned citizens who are interested in organizing against V.C.U.'s detrimental role within our communities while holding the University accountable for their continuing anti-poor practices...

Why Tent City?
Tent cities have historically been a reliable, non-violent direct action approach to raise consciousness of oppressive and exploitative practices. For example, during the Vietnam War, tent cities appeared everywhere from neighborhood parks to the National Mall in D.C.. In recent times, welfare rights activists in Philadelphia and homeless folks in Seattle have organized successful long-term tent cities in their communities...

Why Monroe Park?
Since V.C.U.'s arrival in Richmond in the late 60's, Monroe Park has remained a constant refuge from all of the expansion, gentrification and destruction of the surrounding communities. Oregon Hill fought a long battle with V.C.U. that threatened the fabric of such a close knit community. Recently, the Carver District has felt the mighty blunt of the University with expansion north of Broad Street. Homeless citizens city-wide, who literally have nowhere to turn, are consistently harassed at the hands of the V.C.U. Campus Police, simply for their mere presence in the park. So, for very symbolic reasons, Monroe Park is the perfect setting for this event...

Why late August?
Historically, the V.C.U. fall enrollment is the strongest period of crackdown on the poor and disenfranchised citizens of our city. Thus, it is also the time of year when the focus of the city is upon the campus. Incoming students, their parents and faculty members will be forced to question their humanity when Richmond's most downtrodden join together in force to demand the respect they rightfully deserve.

Why does this concern you?
It is quite simple really. It is the age-old theory of not waiting until the problem is upon your door and there is no one left to fight for you! V.C.U.'s ongoing development and gentrification has affected thousands of Richmond's citizens and it is just a matter of time before you are all that is left...

The General Strike Collective

PO Box 5021

Richmond, VA 23220

(804) 355-6914

generalstrike17@hotmail.com

General Strike Collective

Fanning the flames of discontent in Richmond

Anarchy in Monroe Park!

The weekend that shook VCU



Homeless, students, members of the Carver Community, activists, revolutionaries and others successfully maintain a peaceful, safe, and respectable encampment in Monroe Park from August 28 thru the 31st. We organized the Tent City to pressure VCU to change their anti-poor policies, such as campus police harassment of the poor and the negative affects of VCU's expansion into the Carver Community. We formulated our demands in park assemblies where everyone was invited to attend and take an active role, showing how real, direct democracy can function and meet our needs.

A community was built this weekend in Monroe Park. We shared our food, our blankets, our hopes and fears, and our lives. We collectively formed solutions to any problems that arose. Anyone that was there Friday night can tell you of the empowering feeling of staying in the park after dark that first night as we waited to be dragged away by the police. The police never showed and by Saturday night we had at least twice as many people sleeping in the park. The park was ours because we took it!

ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE!

Get involved with General Strike Collective! We meet the first and third

Wednesday of every month. Call 355-6914 for time and location.

General Strike Collective/ PO Box 5021/ Richmond, VA 23220

A new world in our hearts

When someone makes the decision to stand up and fight back it is a beautiful thing. Whether on a picket line, hugging a tree, blocking a road, or in this case, setting up camp in Monroe Park. It is about challenging our social relations and taking control of our lives. It is about respect and dignity, understanding and solidarity. As organizers and activists we need to be aware of these issues and their impact. Our actions should reflect what we are trying to create. Not for some distant future but for making it through today and tomorrow. Oppression beats down self-esteem. Alienation and competition isolate us. We are left lost and alone. The work of the revolutionary is to rebuild. Rebuild ourselves and our communities to reflect our commitment to individual autonomy and initiative as well as creating a collective process that is egalitarian and inclusive. It follows that the organizations we form be founded on the basis of equalizing the decision-making process, voluntary participation and responsibility, mutual assistance and input, and a strong feeling of solidarity. Our actions should not only confront and expose the powers that be but the process of struggle should aim to empower all those who wish to join in the fight.

One of our hopes with the tent city was to engage as many participants as possible in the decision making process regarding tactics, media, demands and the encampment in general. We wanted to make involvement, particularly in drawing up the demands, to be democratic, inclusive, and equal. We wanted the encampment to make collective decisions and implement them together.

With this in mind we scheduled "park assemblies" to take place on Saturday and Sunday. We planned them close to the meals served throughout the encampment hoping to maximize involvement by the homeless. We had a calendar of events for the weekend that stressed the importance of the assemblies. Saturday served to enhance our collective understanding of the issues and to get us all on the same page so we could come back Sunday and iron out a list of demands to be presented to VCU.

During the assemblies we sat in a circle with probably about 30 people. A conversation among this many people will undoubtedly be chaotic and all over the place. We wanted the discussion to be flexible and open, but when things were really heading off course we weren't shy about getting back to the matters at hand. Two or more of us General Strikers acted as informal facilitators on Saturday. The role of facilitators on Saturday was to keep the discussion on the issues at hand, to keep a speakers list (a list of people who wanted to speak in first come, first serve order), and to encourage and insure the chance for anyone to voice their opinions, concerns, and ideas. The Saturday discussion focused on VCU's policies and their impact on poor people. Such as the gentrification of low-income neighborhoods effectively displacing the urban poor, intimidation and harassment of homeless persons in the area of the university, and VCU's policing of Monroe Park. At times the conversation spilled over to other institutions in the city that have consistently pushed forward with anti-poor agendas including City Hall, Ethyl Corporation, the Jefferson Hotel, West Avenue Association and others.

Demands-We want Virginia Commonwealth University to work with the community towards the following demands:

Monroe Park must remain a public community space where all are welcome at all times free from harassment.*

Food sharing and other social services programs for the homeless must remain in Monroe Park.*

VCU should take a proactive stance towards ending homelessness by working to help solve the problems facing those who are homeless as opposed to trying to hide the issue.

VCU should bargain in good faith and on an equal level with the communities and the people of Carver, Jackson Ward, and Oregon Hill.

VCU must agree to participate in dialogue (ie. well-publicized town meetings) with the public: local residents, students, and homeless.

*It is being understood that it is the responsibility of all who use the park to maintain it.

On Sunday we renewed the dialogue and began drawing up the demands. The facilitator role had to be much more formal, particularly in the actual wording of the demands. This time the facilitator had to really work to keep us on task. After brainstorming a general list of demands we had to go back through them, combining, deleting and adding where necessary. Of course, there was pretty thorough discussion all along the way. Then we had to make the demands concise and make sure everyone was in agreement with the specific wording of the six demands. By Sunday evening, although it had been a rocky path, we had formulated our demands into a cohesive list.



In retrospect, the park assemblies were most successful as a means of education. First off, the assemblies consisted of homeless folks, students, sympathizers, and activists. For many it may have been the first time they were exposed to the realities of each-others lives. The students heard directly from poor people how their university harasses and intimidates the less fortunate. The homeless were exposed to sympathetic students that stand with them in solidarity. The assemblies served as a bridge of the social and cultural distance between the different people taking part in the tent city. Anarchist Emma Goldman wrote, "true social harmony grows naturally out of a solidarity of interests." We didn't create "true social harmony" in the park that weekend, but through our common aims, shared interests, and collective decision making we built a community in resistance. To this day friendships created that weekend still flourish.

Secondly, the park assemblies served as an active form of education. A lesson in real, direct democracy. A crash course in taking control of our own lives. Besides all the discussion of goals and power relations we discussed the minute to minute issues of how we could all live together peacefully in the park. What if the cops come? Who wants to talk to the media? Can we make sure the families with kids get tents? We need to get more water. What about those folks getting drunk in that tent over there? People getting together to confront the problems that directly affect them with no leaders, no bosses just free people with a common goal. If we want to change this world we must start now. Not just by fighting the institutions that hold us down but by creating new forms of organization that are empowering and egalitarian.



When we moved into the park Friday at noon and started putting up tents and hanging banners from the trees we didn't know what to expect. We had discussed over and over what we hoped would happen and we knew we couldn't do it alone. We needed people. People who would take an active part in making the tent city work. As organizers, we knew what we wanted to create, but had little practical experience in doing it. The park assemblies served to stir people into thinking and spur them into action. The community that was created was way beyond our expectations. It wasn't some secret formula that we based our actions on. The actions were grounded in the most human of ideas: equality, solidarity, respect, and mutual aid. With this framework we were able to create something amazing. Something that challenged us but brought us closer together. As we marched out of the park Monday morning to deliver the demands to VCU there was no question in my mind that we had already won.